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2 **HEAR US O LORD FROM HEAVEN THY DWELLING PLACE**

by Malcolm Lowry

reviewed by Robert Fulford

4 **TWO PARAGRAPHS FROM UNDER SEYMOUR MOUNTAIN**

by George Woodcock

5 **THE SPICE-BOX OF EARTH**

by Leonard Cohen

reviewed by Arnold Edinborough

7 **VIEWS**

8 **AND REVIEWS**

Eskimo Sculpture. Literature and the Press. The Incredible Journey

9 **SOLUTION TO MOSSWORD NUMBER ONE**

10 **PAST SELECTIONS**

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HEAR US O LORD FROM HEAVEN THY DWELLING PLACE

by Malcolm Lowry

reviewed by Robert Fulford

This review by Robert Fulford is reprinted from the Toronto Daily Star with the kind permission of Mr. Fulford and the Star.

The heroes of Malcolm Lowry's fiction come to us under many names, but they are all tortured versions of Malcolm Lowry's own tortured self. His posthumous collection of stories, *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, is essentially a multiple view of Lowry's own life. It is also a fascinating book — immensely readable, marvelously refreshing, altogether memorable.

Lowry was born in England but he lived near Vancouver in his last two decades; he's often claimed as a Canadian writer. In 1947 he published *Under the Volcano*, a novel that was widely praised in the United States. Before his death in 1957 he also published one other novel, some stories, and some poems. This book is the first to be issued posthumously, but later there will be others — perhaps two more novels, a few stories, and a number of poems.

In *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* there are seven stories, two of them long enough to be called short novels.. They are set in British Columbia, in Rome, and at sea. They concern a variety of characters — Kenneth Drumgold Cosnahan, Roderick McGregor Fairhaven, Sigbjorn Wilderness — in remarkably similar psychological situations. For the most part these characters alternate erratically between despair and hope, between an anguished sense of inadequacy and a painfully bought vision of joy.

"Through the Panama", one of the long pieces, is at once the most successful and the most "literary" of the stories — "literary" in the sense that it is as much about writing as about anything else. On a sea voyage from Vancouver to Europe, the novelist Sigbjorn Wilderness keeps a journal in which he tells us of his thoughts and actions, past and present.

We begin to read it in a mood of skepticism. The pages are spotted with the names of Lowry's oddly assorted heroes and guideposts — Joseph Conrad, Scott Fitzgerald, and Bix Beiderbecke are among them — and it seems at the beginning that this is to be merely a series of random jottings. But as the narrator describes his own anguish and conveys his own sense of bored futility, it becomes obvious that this is much more than a journal. Then the little freighter on which Sigbjorn is sailing plunges into a terrible storm. We are carried through it in a mood of terror which is brilliantly understated,

and by the end Lowry has made the storm into a beautiful metaphor of loneliness and alienation.

One critic, in reviewing this book, has expressed the hope that Lowry's chaotic life will not become so entwined with his writing that the result will be a myth on the style of Dylan Thomas. The hope is vain. Lowry's work is such that to divorce his life from his art would work against his own intentions. He used the materials of his life in a factual-fictional style and left us a terrifying three-dimensional portrait of the creative personality.

Lowry was a luckless man. His manuscripts seemed to lose themselves, his houses burned down, his alcoholism hung around his neck till it finally killed him. He seems never to have liked himself very much — indeed, self-hatred pushes itself frequently through these pages.

Sigbjorn, one day out of Vancouver, wrote in his journal:

"The inerrable inconceivable desolate sense of having no right to be where you are; the billows of inexhaustible anguish haunted by the insatiable albatross of self."

This tone makes itself felt, again and again, through the book. Even when Lowry's wonderfully elaborate sense of humour breaks through there is still a memory of that albatross, hanging around, waiting to be satisfied. It appears even in the last piece, "The Forest Path to the Spring", a meditative and sometimes idyllic piece about an isolated life in British Columbia.

Lowry loved that part of Canada — and hated the rest. Sigbjorn refers to: "... the appalling sights of despair and degradation to be met with daily in the streets of Vancouver, Canada, where man, having turned his back on nature, and having no heritage of beauty else, and no faith in a civilization where God has become an American washing machine, or a car he refuses even to drive properly — and not possessing the American elan which arises from a faith in the very act of taming nature herself, because America having run out of a supply of nature to tame is turning on Canada, so that Canada feels herself at bay ..."

Lowry was anxious, apparently, to stuff everything of himself into these stories. In Europe his writer-hero, having experienced a modest first success, comes to the ugly realization that despite all his intentions success has somehow ruined him — for the moment, anyway. In Rome another hero makes that appalling visit to that appalling onetime home of John Keats; there he turns inward and reveals himself finally to us as an anguished hopelessly crippled personality.

Though these stories were apparently written over a period of some years, and though their settings are different, they fall together comfortably in one book. Themes are repeated, anecdotes are retold in different forms, and the whole volume emerges as a consistent and revealing and disturbing account of what it is to be a writer and what it was to be Malcolm Lowry.

HEAR US O LORD FROM HEAVEN THY DWELLING PLACE is published by Longmans, Green & Company. It has 283 pages. **Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place** is published at \$5.75. Readers' Club members' price is \$4.50.

TWO PARAGRAPHS FROM UNDER SEYMOUR MOUNTAIN

by George Woodcock

The following two paragraphs on the art of Malcolm Lowry are taken, with kind permission, from George Woodcock's article, Under Seymour Mountain, which introduces the current issue of Canadian Literature. For more on this special Malcolm Lowry issue of Canadian Literature, see Views, page 7.

The stories in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* are all worth reading for themselves; some of the non-Canadian examples, while they do not attain the intensity of feeling of "The Forest Path to the Spring", are interesting for their experimental exploration of the problems of conveying multiple levels of meaning. "Through the Panama" is an example; the narrator, a transmuted Lowry figure, voyages to Europe by freighter, but his journey is also that of a modern Ancient Mariner, with the albatross of literary creation and its attendant curse hung around his neck as he considers his novels about novelists who are his own mirror images. For Lowry belonged in the early twentieth century cosmopolitan tradition that seemed to reach an end about the time of his death — the tradition of Proust and Gide, which came to the conclusion, inevitable after a century of introspection, that the proper study of the writer is the writer's mind.

But all these stories are also part of a great continuum, a vast Work in Progress that filled Lowry's life and was never completed — perhaps never could be completed. In this sense Lowry was of the Proustian rather than of the Gidian tradition. The Gidians write many separate studies of experience, all related, but each self-contained; when one novel is finished a phase of investigation is ended, its record is terminated as quickly as possible, and then the writer is on to the next experience and the next novel. But the Proustians, and Lowry among them, conceive all their work as one great inter-related pattern on whose parts they work continuously and simultaneously. Proust could never leave the one great work of his life alone; he worked backwards and forwards over his manuscript, and only publication ever gave a final form to any of its parts; only death, one can be sure, put a period to the work itself, coming by coincidence at the point when Proust had reached the end of his original plan. So it was with Lowry. He worked on several novels, on stories and poems, all at the same time, and his revisions were multiple to the point of Flaubertian obsession. For this reason he spent many years over each novel, writing on others at the same time; his actually completed works are few out of all proportion to those he sketched out and started. Another decade of work might — and equally well might not — have presented us with a masterpiece in its own very different way in rivalling *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, perhaps even in one direction exceeding it, since Lowry possessed no cork-lined room and revised and added to his Work in Progress as a result, not of remembering a past now dead, but of experiencing and incorporating a lived present.

AN ALTERNATE SELECTION

THE SPICE-BOX OF EARTH

by Leonard Cohen

reviewed by Arnold Edinborough

Because he has appeared so often on Fighting Words and because he is such a contentious publicity seeker, Irving Layton is often regarded as Canada's major poet. With the publication of *The Spice-Box of Earth*, Leonard Cohen instantly takes over this position. *The Spice-Box of Earth* is an apt title. For Leonard Cohen is earthy and spicy. But his mind is also a spice box — full of precious elements of imagery, of symbolism and of myth which tumble forth into his poems.

Further, the spice box reminds us of the bible and Cohen's poetry is richly allusive to his old testament tradition.

Cohen is also young; one can believe the ecstasies of love which he describes. For too long now Canadian love poetry has been in the hands of Layton, whose sexual athletics have been for the past ten years little more than mere exercises in technique.

Again, Cohen doesn't boast about his loving. I remember leaning over the balcony on the first evening at the recent Canadian Conference of the Arts at the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto to hear him read this:

CELEBRATION

*When you kneel below me
and in both your hands
hold my manhood like a sceptre,*

*When you wrap your tongue
about the amber jewel
and urge my blessing*

*I understood those Roman girls
who danced around a shaft of stone
and kissed it till the stone was warm.*

*Kneel, love, a thousand feet below me,
so far I can barely see your mouth and hands
perform the ceremony,*

*Kneel till I topple to your back
with a groan, like those gods on the roof
that Samson pulled down.*

This is one of the most erotic poems ever to have been written in Canada, and yet middle aged women ranged in front of Cohen, loved every syllable of it. They did not even appear to be shocked.

The reason for this is simple. Cohen read it for what it is — a poem; a moment of private ecstasy made acceptably public by means of rhythm, imagery and intensely precise feeling transmuted into equally precise and intense language.

In this precision of image and this intensity of feeling, Cohen synthesises the better qualities of Jay Macpherson on the one hand and Irving Layton on the other. Not that he is imitative of either. His is a truly original talent.

For sheer precision, for the adding of another dimension to language, take this extract from his poem *Isaiah*:

*Between the mountains of spices
the cities thrust up pearl domes and filigree spires.
Never before was Jerusalem so beautiful.*

*In the sculptured temple how many pilgrims,
lost in the measures of tambourine and lyre,
kneeled before the glory of the ritual?*

*Trained in grace the daughters of Zion moved,
not less splendid than the golden statuary,
the bravery of ornaments about their scented feet.*

*Government was done in palaces.
Judges, their fortunes found in law,
reclining and cosmopolitan, praised reason.
Commerce like a strong wild garden
flourished in the street.
The coins were bright, the crest on coins precise,
new ones looked almost wet.*

Again, the kind of attitude which can in *I Have Not Lingered In European Monasteries* produce this:

*I have not been unhappy for ten thousand years.
During the day I laugh and during the night I sleep.
My favourite cooks prepare my meals,
my body cleans and repairs itself,
and all my work goes well*

can also, on another page, say:

*I wonder how many people in this city
live in furnished rooms.
Late at night when I look out at the buildings
I swear I see a face in every window
looking back at me,
and when I turn away
I wonder how many go back to their desks
and write this down.*

Grave, gay, erotic, intense, ironic, deeply traditional — all these are descriptive of Cohen's poetry. In *The Spice-Box of Earth* we have an aromatic collection representing all these qualities and, as the title indicates, all of them processed with care into a soothing balm for any poetic soul.

THE SPICE-BOX OF EARTH is published by McClelland & Stewart Limited. It contains 88 short poems on 94 pages. Jacket, book design and illustrations by Frank Newfeld. Three-colour printing. The *Spice-Box of Earth* is published at \$3.00 in cloth binding and \$1.50 in paper binding. Readers' Club members' price for the cloth edition is \$2.40. The paper edition will be supplied at retail price when specifically requested.

VIEWS

The excitement surrounding the rediscovery of Malcolm Lowry provides us with an opportunity to give a graceful nod towards two Canadian journals which, we think, are of interest to Readers' Club members.

The current issues of both *Canadian Literature* and *The Tamarack Review* contain material on and by Malcolm Lowry. Of course, they are not alone in their interest in Lowry; *Saturday Review* did a major review of HEAR US O LORD and *Time* has printed a review and an article by Lowry himself.

But the laurels go to *Canadian Literature*. In this splendid periodical's eighth and current issue, most of the space at the editor's disposal has gone to Malcolm Lowry material. There is a critical tribute by George Woodcock, editor, part of which is reprinted on page 4; there is an article entitled "The Possessed Artist and the Ailing Soul" by Robert B. Heilman of the University of Washington; there is a French appreciation of Lowry by Max-Pol Fouchet and a tribute to him by Conrad Aiken whose own works influenced Lowry enormously; there is a personal reminiscence by Downie Kirk who was Lowry's close friend for many years; there is also a scholarly bibliography of Lowry's works prepared by Earle Birney and Marguerite Lowry and, not least, there are letters and poems by Lowry himself.

For those interested, this issue of *Canadian Literature* is available for \$1.00 from Basil Stuart-Stubbs, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver 8, B.C. A year's subscription to this quarterly costs only \$3.00 from the same address.

The Tamarack Review's tribute to Lowry is shorter. It consists of seventeen short poems of uneven quality by Lowry, together with a personal and biographical sketch of Lowry by Earle Birney who, incidentally, is doing much of the editorial work on Lowry's remaining unpublished material. *Tamarack*, with its sunburst cover by Theo Dimson, is published quarterly from Box 157, Station K, Toronto. Single copies are \$1.25 and a year's subscription costs \$4.00.

Jack McClelland, of McClelland and

Stewart Limited, a publisher who supplies an impressive number of the books chosen by the Readers' Club Selection Committee, has taken a look at the future of books in Canada in a recent issue of *Quill and Quire*, the magazine of the Canadian book trade. Mr. McClelland finds himself encouraged by the number of new, aggressive and competently managed book stores appearing across Canada. But he points out that book buyers and book sellers alike suffer from the confusions and inefficiencies of book distribution in this country. Canada's market for books is growing fast, but the bookseller "can only sell more books when the books the customer wants can be made available in a reasonable amount of time; when the customer no longer walks out of the shop in tears of frustration". Mr. McClelland suggests an interesting solution: one central fully-automated warehouse which would handle distribution of all English-language books to retailers and to libraries. This system, together with cheaper air delivery (which is just around the corner), would free the bookseller to serve his customers better and would largely eliminate the Canadian reader's chronic frustration of having to wait weeks while his local book store located a book he wanted.

UNESCO reports that the Soviet Union has 752,604,000 books available for borrowers on public library shelves. The U.S.A., by comparison, has only 200,000,000; Britain comes third with 71,000,000. Our source of information doesn't tell us how many books there are in Canada's public libraries; perhaps it's just as well not to know.

More on UNESCO. Canada's National Commission for UNESCO (see "Publishing for Peace", CR, May 1961) has recently issued a fifty-page *Book List on Asia* in association with the University of Toronto Library. This handsome pamphlet lists and describes some 500 works in English or French which relate to what is loosely termed "Asia", "the East", or "the Orient". G. M. Wickens, who did the work, says that the purpose of this list "is to present other, living civiliza-

tions less as problems for the West to master than as organic creations of some of the human family's significant groupings". The *Book List on Asia* is available free of charge for those interested from Canadian National Commission for UNESCO, 140 Wellington Street, Ottawa.

* * *

The book display on Fifth Avenue which we mentioned here last month has moved from its store window to a choice location in New York's Washington Heights Public Library. During July and August Gotham Library patrons will not only be able to look at eighty recent Canadian books, but they will also be able to borrow them to read.

* * *

We are chagrined. Sylvia Moss is mortified. There was an error in Mossword

Number One. Two down was Arthur. Eleven across was Never. Our mortified puzzlemaker used the same misshaped, misbegotten letter for the 'u' in Arthur and the 'v' in Never. We have visions of thousands of frustrated puzzlers across the country unable to believe either that their solutions are wrong or that the puzzlemaker was in error. Thus, the contest on Mossword Number One is extended; anyone who writes a plausible letter to us claiming that they have solved the puzzle completely except for the dilemma of two down and eleven across will receive a copy of *Diversions of Duchesstown* or, if our supply is exhausted, of another comparably delightful book. In the meantime, our Miss Moss is on bread and water while she checks Mossword Number Two for errors.

AND REVIEWS

It sometimes surprises Canadians to learn that the study of the culture and art of the Eskimo is far advanced in countries other than our own. A few readers, at least, are likely to be surprised by a modest but attractive little book called *Eskimo Sculpture* (Ryerson, \$3.00) which was written and originally published in Denmark. The author's name is Jorgen Meldgaard, and in a total of only forty pages of text and forty pages of black and white photographs, he presents a vivid and neatly organized summary of what is known of Eskimo cultures, prehistoric and historical.

The earliest finds described in this book date from about 300 B.C. Four major prehistoric cultures — with the romantic names of Okvik, Ipiutak, Dorset and Thule — are introduced through their surviving art works. Historical Eskimo cultures — those, that is, which existed when the White Man arrived in the North — are surveyed from Alaska to Greenland. And finally modern Eskimo sculpture is described and related to the cultures and the sculptures which have gone before.

Meldgaard's analysis of modern Canadian Eskimo sculpture is full of surprises for the layman whose familiarity with this art has been gained in gift shops. "The Canadian sculptors are exceptional in

that they did not appear until after the arrival of the traders and missionaries about 30-40 years ago. Thriving on encouragement and praise from authorities and institutions, they have flourished and reached their present very high standards all within the last 12-15 years." "But perhaps," the author speculates, "after all these figures are to some degree traditional, for it is not impossible that modern Canadian Eskimos have running in their veins some of the blood from the old Dorset artists."

This book has forty pages of clear, carefully reproduced photographs of Eskimo sculpture — seventy-five plates in all. It costs \$3.00. Book bargains like this are unfortunately rare.

PETER MARTIN.

* * *

The literary arts today have become "the appealing arts", catering to the public taste for the sake of profit. "Literature has practically been pushed out of existence by the mass magazines." Newspapers "under any pressure (are) functionless except for the purpose of increasing sales; that is, advertising makes the newspaper morally and intellectually deaf and mute." The content of books is governed by "the tyranny of cash". "The best writing is to be found in small magazines which are not even known to the majority of the

reading public." "The best poetry, of whatever school . . . is . . . circulated almost privately among the poets themselves and the small interested minority."

Thus, Louis Dudek, poet, publisher, editor and teacher, excoriating the tyranny of production and profit over literature (*Literature and the Press*, Ryerson & Contact Press, \$5.00). Mr. Dudek writes of the Industrial Revolution in printing, the application of machine production to reading matter. Quick quantity production and the profit motive may multiply goods for physical consumption; products of the imagination are not so well served. The consequent deterioration of literary values during the last century is the object of Mr. Dudek's scathing criticism. He is deeply concerned for the survival of the literary art in the mass communications society of the future.

Some few good writers, holding to their integrity; the recent popularity of the better paperback series; the growth of the critical faculty in our youth — there are a few rays of light on Mr. Dudek's horizon. In general, all is dark as Erebus. Whether or not the reader agrees with Mr. Dudek's more sweeping indictments, he will find *Literature and the Press* most provocative.

OLIVE KOYAMA

* * *

Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* (Hodder & Stoughton, \$3.75) is on top of the *Sunday Times* list in England. It's on the best seller list in the *New York Times Book Review*. Walt Disney has bought the movie rights. The book is now being translated into seven other languages.

All of this excitement is on behalf of

an occasionally inept, occasionally coy first novel which tells the story (fictional, of course) of three animals' trek alone through two hundred and fifty miles of bush at Ontario's Lakehead.

The protagonists in this story are a sturdy, cautious Labrador retriever, a resourceful Siamese cat and a friendly old bull terrier. Together they face a hostile bear and a raging flood. They bring good fortune to a band of Ojibway Indians and comfort to an old hermit. Their adventures are violent and dangerous but, ultimately, they win through and are reunited with their master.

The humans who appear in this book are dreadful paper dolls. They live the implausible lives that English spinsters would imagine for Canadian backwoodsmen. An air of absurd gentility surrounds them.

The plot is amateurish and contrived.

Yet in spite of these formidable shortcomings, Mrs. Burnford's book is attractive (as recognition by Disney and others might suggest). Why? The answer lies in the writer's felicity in observing and recording the non-human reactions of animals. Her story is free of the sort of anthropomorphism that makes Thornton W. Burgess a children's writer only. Her animals are plausible. They react as animals and not as human beings. Yet at the same time they gain our sympathy as creatures who must be respected and recognized for what they are.

This is a very odd book. Its shortcomings, which are many and obvious, make its appeal almost incomprehensible. Yet the appeal remains.

G. MARTEL

SOLUTION TO MOSSWORD NUMBER ONE

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14. Tetrarch 17. Strasse 20. Samurai 22. Baggy 23. Martini 25. Sanga
26. Nestegg 27. Annus

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8. Regent 12. Literary 13. Tar 15. Athabaska 16. Clergyman 17. Stasimon
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MOSSWORD NUMBER TWO will appear in the August issue of *The Canadian Reader*.

PAST SELECTIONS

Past Selections of the Readers' Club remain available to Club members at special members' Prices. Members may order any of these books in place of or in addition to this month's Selection or Alternate.

The Club will also supply members with any other book in print at regular retail prices—no charge for postage.

FICTION

THE VIOLENT SEASON by Robert Goulet. A wild and shocking story which explores the violence lying beneath the surface of a Quebec village. Published at \$4.50. Member's price \$3.60.

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THE LUCK OF GINGER COFFEY. Brian Moore's poignant story of an Irish immigrant's battle against self-deception in alien Montreal. Published at \$4.00. Member's price \$3.15.

WHERE THE HIGH WINDS BLOW. David Walker's large-scale novel about a twentieth-century Canadian tycoon. Published at \$3.95. Member's price \$3.15.

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CANADIAN SHORT STORIES, edited by Robert Weaver. Twenty-seven carefully selected Canadian short stories in the Oxford World's Classics series. This book is remarkable value for the reading dollar. Introduction by Robert Weaver. Published at \$1.75. Member's price \$1.40.

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A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF CANADA edited by D. G. G. Kerr. Magnificent maps, charts and drawings, informative text and tables attractively and sensibly assembled make this book a treasure. Published at \$5.00. Member's price \$4.00.

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PEACEMAKER OR POWDER-MONKEY by James M. Minifie, an authoritative and passionate argument for a neutralist foreign policy for Canada and **THE TRUE FACE OF DUPLESSIS** by Pierre Laporte, the best-selling informal biography of Quebec's late strong man. **A Dual Selection.** Published at \$3.50 each. Member's price for both books \$5.50. (These titles may be had individually at retail price.)

CONTEMPORARY CANADA by Miriam Chapin. A friendly American journalist looks at our country without the usual rosy glasses. Published at \$7.50. Member's price \$5.50.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE MASS AGE. George Grant discusses God, morality, Marxism and the Mass Society in provocative Canadian terms. Published at \$3.10. Member's price \$2.40.

THE DESPERATE PEOPLE by Farley Mowat. A hard-hitting account of the Eskimo's misery and Canada's shame. Published at \$5.00. Member's price \$4.00.

BIOGRAPHY

ALEXANDER MACKENZIE: CLEAR GRIT. Dale C. Thomson's brilliant biographical rediscovery of Canada's least-remembered Prime Minister. Published at \$6.75. Member's price \$5.25.

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